DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 109 EA 026 792

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TITLE School Characteristics Related to Principals' Perceived Needs for a Violence Prevention Program in the Arkansas Delta.
PUB DATE Nov 94
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Nashville, TN, November 9-11, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Attitudes; Elementary Secondary Education; Local Norms; *Needs Assessment; *Prevention; *Principals; School Demography; School Districts; School District Size; School District Wealth; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS *Arkansas

ABSTRACT

The fear of violence among students and teachers is straining the learning environment in many schools. This paper presents findings of a study that investigated school district characteristics in relation to the level of principals' expressed needs for school-violence prevention programs. The district characteristics included finance, size, racial demography, attendance, and academic indicators. Data were derived from a survey of 239 elementary, middle/junior high, and high school principals from 108 school districts in the Mississippi river delta region of Arkansas. Eighty-eight of the districts responded, an 82 percent response rate. Overall, the principals expressed a high level of need for violence-prevention programs. Principals in districts with lower attendance, lower academic performance, and higher percentages of African-American students expressed a higher level of need. The data did not show a relationship between the need for violence-prevention programs and district size or district financial status. (LMI)

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ED 384 109

SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS RELATED TO PRINCIPALS' PERCEIVED NEEDS FOR A VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAM IN THE ARKANSAS DELTA

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
Mid-South Educational Research Association
November 11, 1994; Nashville, TN

EA026 792

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The problem of youth violence is regularly addressed by the media. Nationally, youth homicides are reported to have doubled since 1986 (Bayles, 1993). In the most populated county in Arkansas, juvenile arrests for murder are reported to have increased from eight in the four-year period from 1985-88 to 69 in the four-year period from 1989-92, an increase of 863% (Sandlin, 1993). Fear of violence among students and teachers is straining the learning environment in many schools. According to one report of a national survey of cities, there has been a noticeable increase in school violence over the past five years ("School Violence," 1994). Although the largest increase had been noted in larger cities, small schools report a substantial increase as well. Concern about youth violence in schools is so prominent that three resolutions calling for stronger measures in combatting violence were introduced at a recent National Education Association convention (Naylor, 1993).

In response to the upsurge in youth violence, many federal agencies and national organizations have begun to explore ways to address this serious social problem. The American Psychological Association established a Commission on Youth and Violence which recommended schools as playing an important part in violence prevention (American Psychological Association, 1993). The commission recommended state educational agencies support violence prevention programs in the schools and individual schools explore ways to develop appropriate violence prevention programs at all grade levels so children can learn ". . . effective, nonviolent solutions to social conflicts" (p. 74). The commission also recommended violence reduction training programs for school personnel.

Recently, we reported the findings of a 23-item needs survey on violence prevention in the schools in 24 Eastern Arkansas counties in the Arkansas Mississippi river delta (Enger & Howerton, 1993). A total of 239 elementary, middle/junior high, and high school principals from 108 school districts responded to questions regarding acts of violence and confrontations at their schools. They also indicated their perceived need for violence prevention programs. Overall, 96% of the principals reported need for violence prevention programs for children in their schools; 97% reported need for in-service programs on violence prevention for teachers.

The purpose of this investigation was to examine school district characteristics (finances, size, racial breakdown, attendance, and academic indicators) in relation to the level of principals' expressed needs for school violence prevention programs.

Method

Characteristics of the 108 school districts in 24 counties surveyed were obtained from statistical reports provided by the Arkansas Department of Education (Annual School District Report Card, December, 1992; and Rankings of Arkansas School Districts on Selected Items, January, 1993). District characteristics were compiled on finances, size, racial breakdowns,

attendance, and academic indicators. Indicators on finances were: expense (cost per student), teacher salary (average salary of teachers K-12), assessed valuation (the assessed valuation of the district in millions of dollars), and millage (the district millage rate). Indicators on district size were: students (average daily membership), teachers (number of teachers K-12), and area (area of the district in square miles). District indicators on racial breakdowns were: Black students (percent of Black students) and Black teachers (percent of Black teachers). The district attendance indicators were: dropouts (the percent of students dropping out in grades 7-12), attendance rate (the average daily attendance divided by the average daily membership), and completion rate (percent of students completing the 12th grade that were enrolled during or after the 9th grade). The academic indicators for students in the district were: MPT pass rate (percent of 8th grade students passing the minimum performance test for admission to high school), SAT lowest quarter (percent of students tested in grades 4, 7 and 10 on the Stanford Achievement Test, 8th edition, who scored at or below the 25th percentile), SAT upper half (percent of students tested in grades 4, 7 and 10 scoring at or above the 50th percentile), SAT highest quarter (percent of students tested in grades 4, 7 and 10 scoring at or above the 75th percentile), taking math (percent of students in grades 9-12 taking math courses Algebra 1 or higher), taking science (percent of students in grades 10-12 taking biology, chemistry, physics or advanced science), taking ACT (percent of seniors taking ACT), and average ACT (average ACT composite score of graduates on the last test taken). These district characteristics were correlated with a measure of overall district need for a violence prevention program, compiled from a district average of principal responses for the need of a violence prevention program at the elementary, middle/junior high, and high school levels.

Results

Survey responses to the violence prevention program needs assessment were received form 88 of the 108 districts in the Arkansas delta (81.5%). Summary statistics for the school district characteristics are given in Table 1. Financial indicators across districts differed markedly. Costs per student ranged from $2587 to $6556 and averaged $3178. Average teacher salaries also differed markedly from $19000 to $32000. Assessed valuation for the districts ranged from $4.4 to $221.5 million and millage rates varied from 18 to 39.

School districts ranged in size from 140 to 5863 students. Number of teachers ranged from 9 to 379. The average percent of Black students was 21%; school districts in the region had an average of 11% Black teachers. For the attendance indicators, the average dropout rate was 3.2%, the average attendance rate was 95%, and the average completion rate was 82%.

At the time of this investigation, students in Arkansas were required to pass a minimum performance test (MPT) before starting high school in the 9th grade. MPT pass rates averaged 97.4%, however, district pass rates on the MPT ranged from 71% to 100%. School districts in Arkansas are also required to administer a standardized achievement test at particular grade levels. At the time of this investigation, districts were required to administer the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT), 8th edition, in grades 4, 7 and 10. Percentages of these students in the lowest quarter nationally ranged from 2% to 72%; however, the 25.2% average was

consistent with the national norms. Percentages of students in the top half of the distribution of SAT scores nationally ranged from 8% to 73% with an average of 43.0%, somewhat lower than the national norms. Percentages of students in the top quarter of the distribution of SAT scores nationally ranged form 20% to 88% with an average of 19.1%, again somewhat lower than the national norms.

The percentage of students taking Algebra 1 or higher math courses in high school ranged from 25% to 95% with an average of 55.6%. Those taking biology, chemistry, physics or advanced science in high school ranged from 30% to 100% with an average of 61.7%.

Seniors taking the ACT college admissions test ranged across districts from 20% to 88% with an average of 52.2% taking ACT. The average ACT composite score by district ranged from 14 to 22 with an average of 19.1.

Overall, these Arkansas Mississippi delta school districts are relatively small (averaging 1109 students and 72 teachers in grades K-12), spend varying amounts to educate students (ranging from $2587 to $6556 per student per year), have markedly different racial proportions of students (all Black, no White to no Black, all White), have better than average attendance and completion rates (95% and 82%, respectively), and are below average in some academic indicators (namely the Stanford Achievement Test battery).

School district characteristics correlations with principals' perceived needs for violence prevention programs are presented in Table 2. No financial indicators were significantly related to needs for violence prevention programs. Likewise, no indicators of district size were related to these needs. In the demographic of racial proportions, the percentage of Black students was related to greater needs for violence prevention programs. All attendance indicators (dropout rate, attendance rate, and completion rate) were significantly related to needs for violence prevention programs. Of the eight academic indicators, six were significantly related to needs for violence prevention programs. These were MPT pass rate, the three SAT performance variables, the percentage of high school students taking upper level math, and the average ACT score.

Discussion

Overall, the needs expressed by principals for violence prevention programs were very high (Enger and Howerton, 1993). Even with this attenuated measure of need, significant relationships were noted with student attendance indicators (lower attendance, higher need), academic indicators (lower academic performance, higher need), and racial proportions (higher percentages of Black students, higher needs).

However, no significant relationships between needs for violence prevention programs were noted with financial or district size indicators. Future research should investigate more specific financial indicators (such as student home life/poverty level) and size indicators (such as school/class size).

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Table 1

School District Characteristics in the Arkansas Delta (N = 108)

District Characteristics	Mean	Std Dev	Minimum	Maximum
Financial Indicators				
Cost per Student	3178	564	2587	6556
Average Teacher Salary	25500	2277	19000	32000
Assessed Valuation (in millions)	34.0	38.3	4.4	221.5
Millage Rate	27	4	18	39
District Size				
Number of Students	1109	1008	140	5863
Number of Teachers	72	67	9	379
Area in Square Miles	155	92	34	627
Racial Proportions				
% Black Students	21	31	0	100
% Black Teachers	11	20	0	88
Attendance Indicators				
Dropout Rate	3.2	2.1	0	10
Attendance Rate	95	1	91	100
Completion Rate	82	12	36	100
Academic Indicators				
MPT Pass Rate	97.4	4.4	71	100
SAT Lowest Quarter	25.2	14.3	2	72
SAT Upper Half	43.0	14.5	8	73
SAT Highest Quarter	19.1	12.2	20	88
% Taking Math	55.6	14.2	25	95
% Taking Science	61.7	15.0	30	100
% Taking ACT	52.2	12.2	20	88
Average ACT	19.1	1.6	14	22

Table 2

Correlations of School District Characteristics with Principals' Perceived Needs for Violence Prevention Programs (N = 88)

District Characteristics	Correlation w/ Perceived Need	t-prob.	2-tail significance
Financial Indicators			
Cost per Student	.004	.973	
Average Teacher Salary	.141	.192	
Assessed Valuation (in millions)	-.007	.951	
Millage Rate	-.118	.274	
District Size			
Number of Students	.031	.774	
Number of Teachers	.048	.655	
Area in Square Miles	-.106	.325	
Racial Proportions			
% Black Students	.264	.013	significant
% Black Teachers	.139	.197	
Attendance Indicators			
Dropout Rate	.232	.029	significant
Attendance Rate	-.267	.012	significant
Completion Rate	-.281	.008	significant
Academic Indicators			
MPT Pass Rate	-.361	.001	significant
SAT Lowest Quarter	.321	.002	significant
SAT Upper Half	-.323	.002	significant
SAT Highest Quarter	-.274	.010	significant
% Taking Math	-.323	.002	significant
% Taking Science	-.139	.201	
% Taking ACT	.010	.928	
Average ACT	-.305	.004	significant